DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 346 564 EA 023 985

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TITLE Aspiring Administrators' Perceptions of the Superintendency as a Viable Career Choice.
PUB DATE Apr 92
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, April 20-24, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Education; *Administrator Role; *Career Choice; Educational Administration; Elementary Secondary Education; Graduate Students; Graduate Study; Higher Education; *Occupational Aspiration; Public Administration Education; *Superintendents

ABSTRACT

Findings of a study that explored aspiring administrators' perceptions of the superintendency as a viable career choice are presented in this paper. Methodology involved the administration of a questionnaire to 197 graduate students enrolled in administrator education courses. Findings indicate that the most powerful motivator was the ability to exercise power and control over organizations and the most powerful disincentive was dealing with community pressure groups. Students reported a general decline in interest in seeking the superintendency. Recommendations for preservice preparation include providing different levels of courses directed toward students' career goals, such as school finance or law, and providing positive role models. Inservice education should consider collegial support networks, peer coaching, and mentoring programs. Appendices contain the Superintendents Job Characteristics Survey and a statistical table of mean scores and rankings. (13 references) (LMI)

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ASPIRING ADMINISTRATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE SUPERINTENDENCY AS A VIABLE CAREER CHOICE

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
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San Francisco, California
April, 1992

EA 023 985

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ASPIRING ADMINISTRATORS PERCEPTIONS OF THE SUPERINTENDENCY AS A VIABLE CAREER CHOICE

During the past century, the role of the superintendent of schools has evolved as the single most important and visible position in the field of education (Campbell, Cunningham, Nystrand & Usdan, 1991). As the chief executive officer of the school system, the superintendent serves often serves the role of being the highest ranking professional educator in a community. As a result, he or she is the spokesperson for the interests of schools in the region. At the same time, in many communities, the superintendent is responsible for overseeing the interests and welfare of the largest corporation within the community.

The visibility and importance of the superintendency should serve as compelling reasons to motivate many talented educators to aspire to and actively pursue this role. However, in recent years, there is an increasing recognition that fewer people are expressing an interest in choosing the superintendency as a career goal. Because of this apparent discrepancy between need and availability of personnel, the study described in this paper was carried out. Two major questions served to guide the research:

1. What are the characteristics of the superintendency that serve to attract individuals to that educational role?
2. What characteristics of the superintendency are perceived as disincentives to the selection of that educational role as a career goal?

The following specific objectives have served to guide the development of this paper. It has been written

1. To provide an overview of a recent study which looked at the perceptions of aspiring school administrators (i.e., individuals enrolled in graduate-level university programs leading to educational administration degrees and initial state certification or licensure) regarding their perceptions of the superintendency as a possible career goal.
2. To describe the factors identified as attractors as well as disincentives to the superintendency as a career.
3. To suggest implications for the refinement of university-based programs that are designed to prepare individuals to assume roles as school superintendents, and also programs that may be devised to provide support for beginning superintendents.

Design and Methodology

One hundred and ninety-seven individual enrolled in graduate-level university courses designed to prepare people for state certification and licensure as school administrators were asked to complete a questionnaire ("Superintendents Job Characteristics Survey"), a copy of which is included as Appendix I. This Survey asked for two types of information. First, individuals were asked if they had any current aspirations for the pursuit of the superintendency at some point in their future careers as educational administrators. If they did, they were asked to respond to a scale which asked them to rate the relative importance of 15 items which had been identified as positive factors associated with the role of the superintendent of schools (Cuban, 1976; Pitner, 1978; Cunningham & Hentges, 1982; Sonedecker, 1984; Davidson, 1987).

By contrast, if individuals indicated that they had no interest in the role of the superintendent, they were directed to respond to a scale which asked for an assessment of the relative value of 15 factors often identified as negative characteristics of the superintendency (Carlson, 1971; Cuban, 1976; Pitner, 1978; Blumberg, 1985; Da idson, 1987; Braddom, 1988; Cunningham & McCloud, 1988).

The findings and conclusions for this study were based on an analysis of the nature of the factors identified as powerful incentives and disincentives to the superintendency.

Findings and Conclusions

The researchers' analysis of the data shown in Table I yielded the following findings and related conclusions:

1. The ability to exercise power and control over organizations was listed as the single most powerful factor influencing people to seek the superintendency as a career goal. The next most important issue listed was related to the opportunity to increase salary, along with increases in prestige.
2. With regard to disincentives, the most powerful issue that was identified was that of the need to deal with community pressure groups.

As a result of the findings that were identified, we concluded that people tend to view the superintendency as a position filled with considerable power and authority. On the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that people also look at the role as one that is filled with great interpersonal and other forms of conflict. This tends to make the role of the superintendent considerably less desirable.

Perhaps an even more significant finding was that, of the 197 individuals who responded to the questionnaire, only 51 indicated that they had a desire to seek a position as a superintendent at some point in their future careers. Barely 25% of the people seeking careers in educational administration aspire to the visible role of chief executive officer.

Discussion

As long as public schools in this country continue to follow the same governance pattern that they have followed for the past one hundred years, the superintendent of schools will remain as a critical role that demands people of courage, talent, and vision. However, the results of this study suggest that fewer people are interested in the challenge of the superintendency, and this will represent a critical problem in the near future. The findings of our study identify some of the reasons why people remain interested in the superintendency as a career option, namely because the role is still perceived as one where it is possible to enjoy a high degree of control and authority over organizations. What this study does not do, of course, is to provide any type of qualitative assessment of the extent to which those who are interested in attaining control

and power in school districts are personally motivated for good or bad reasons. "Taking control" of a school district may represent a desire for individuals to work toward positive change and improve the quality of student learning by sharing a vision for growth and development. On the other hand, "taking control" might also represent a desire to be in charge of a group of people simply as a way to increase personal status and prestige, and to manipulate the people within the school system for personal gain alone. Simply stated, having authority and the right to control implies responsible application of power. We have no idea if those who want to become superintendents because of the availability of formal authority will know how to act responsibly in the future.

On the other hand, our data concerning the reasons for people avoiding the superintendency show that people perceive this important role as one that is filled with a multitude of negative interpersonal relationships. As a result, being a superintendent is seen as something that is not worth seeking in the first place. Somehow, the vision of the superintendency has become one of constant conflict. This understanding of the superintendency almost exclusively is terms of negative relationships is driving talented individuals away from an important career choice. The current views of the superintendent's role must be altered if schools are to find a future pool of

quality leaders.

There are a variety of implications that may be derived from the findings of this study, and these have an implication on the ways in which future school superintendents might be prepared, and also in the ways in which professional development might be provided to those who are in the role of chief executive officer of local school systems.

Preservice Preparation

The prevailing view of superintendent preparation is one that suggests that preparation is tied to state licensure and certification. And, for the most part, certification and licensure in nearly every state is related to university graduate-level degree programs. What this really means is that people tend to be made ready to assume principalships by taking more and more university courses. In addition, there is often an expectation that aspiring superintendents would have some previous administrative experience in schools, and participate in a structured, supervised internship at some time before receiving a state license as a school superintendent.

We believe that a solid foundation in current research related to effective school practice is critical for effective performance in the role of superintendent of schools. People who will lead need to know what to lead about. As a result, we do not argue with the value of requiring people to engage in

academic exercises provided by the expertise found in many universities. However, we would suggest that, when university courses are required of those who aspire to the superintendency, those learning experiences should be designed and directed specifically toward the needs and future duties of people who will serve at the apex of school organizations. What this means is that, in many cases, future superintendents might be required to complete courses in such areas as school finance or school law. However, at the majority of institutions, those courses are taught to address the needs of such a wide variety of learners that they may tend to lose their focus as experiences designed for superintendents. It is quite a different matter to teach about school finance to people who are currently classroom teachers who are seeking initial administrative certification, as contrasted with individuals--who may be seated in the same class in school finance--who have several years of administrative experience and who now want to learn about the kinds of advanced research concerning financing from the perspective of the superintendent. One group is learning what a mill is, while another group in the same class needs to learn about alternative ways of manipulating current millage rates.

Providing different, leveled courses according to the career goals of students enrolled in the courses may sound a

bit impractical as many universities struggle to find ways to keep enrollments at healthy levels. It may be impossible for some institutions to offer one course in school law for those who are first moving into administration, as contrasted with a course for those who are thinking about the superintendency. On the other hand, it may be that universities without the capacity to make this type of commitment to quality preservice preparation of superintendents might not deserve to keep their superintendent preparation and certification programs.

We realize, too, that the data in our study speak to problems that are not associated solely with inadequacies found in university preparation programs. For example, people appear to have lost interest in the superintendency because, in their minds, it is a job that requires too high a personal investment on the part of the individual. There are too many night meetings, confrontations with community pressure groups and teacher associations, lunches with civic groups, and negative discussions with school boards. The typical view of the superintendency is that it is a job filled with stress, anxiety, loss of personal time, and conflict. People who are thinking about this role as a future career choice are not being provided with competing images. This is an important issue because a large number of individuals who might pursue future positions as superintendents believe that they really understand the job

because they have witnessed the position from the perspective of being principals or central office administrators for at least part of their careers. People tend to be socialized to the superintendency by watching a few models during their careers. If a person watches a superintendent in his or her district constantly being distressed by personal conflict, it is likely that the role will not appeal to the witness.

We believe that it is critical for people to have access to multiple role models for the superintendency if there is a desire to recruit new individuals. The majority of educators have relatively little experience with more than one school district during their careers, and as a result, they see few superintendents on a regular basis. If the few executives that they see assume their roles as "victims" on a continuing basis (i.e., with no control over their personal and professional lives as superintendents), observers will likely have a very bad image of the superintendency. On the other hand, exposure to a wide variety of different superintendents will likely yield a similar array of different visions of leadership. While some superintendents find problems, others find challenges and opportunities for creative leadership. It is this latter group that must serve as models for individuals who are thinking about their administrative careers in the future. Simply finding a cadre of positive superintendents will not

automatically ensure that many new talented people will seek the position of chief school executive in the future. On the other hand, we assume that finding nothing but negative models will result in barriers to superintendents.

Inservice Education

The research reported in this paper was directed toward the identification of issues which appear to inhibit people from selecting the school superintendency as a viable career option. As a result, there is little related directly to the improvement of inservice education for practicing superintendents. Nevertheless, we speculate that there may, indeed, be some implications for inservice that are derived from our findings.

People tend to make (or not make) decisions to follow a particular career path based on what they see from the outside as features of a particular career. What people seem to be saying about the superintendency, from their perspectives as "outsiders," is that it is a lonely and stressful job where incumbents are expected to make important decisions in isolation from colleagues, friends, and families. From existing descriptions of the superintendency (Duignan, 1980; Pitner, 1978; Willower & Fraser, 1979; Cunningham & Hentges, 1982; Maizena, 1986), we believe that these perceptions appear to be accurate.

What may be important is to encourage ways of making the superintendency into a somewhat more "livable" career by enhancing the quality of inservice education opportunities that are available to practitioners. We are not simply describing the need for more seminars, workshops, or organized institutes. Rather, we believe that the formation of collegial support networks, peer coaching (or "co-counseling") schemes, and mentor programs for chief educational executive officers might serve as ways in which the job might be made less stressful and, as a result, more desirable by a future generation of school leaders.

Summary

In this paper, we have presented a brief overview of a recent study which looked at the reason why people aspire to the school superintendency, and why people do not wish to become school superintendents at some point in their professional lives as school administrators. Not only did we discover some critical issues, but we also found that there appears to be a general decline in interest in pursuing the superintendency as a viable career choice in the first place. This is a distressing discovery because of the current need for more talented people to seek positions of executive leadership in schools.

There are some limitations to our work. For one thing, the sample was relatively small, given the large number of individuals who are typically enrolled in university preservice preparation programs in educational administration each year. Further, the people who served as respondents were all at the earliest stages of their professional careers--they had no previous experience as school administrators. As a result, they were evaluating the viability of the superintendency from a very distant perspective: Did they <u>really</u> see what superintendents did?

These limitations on this study are important, but they should not be used to obscure an important fact. The superintendent's role is a critical one for the improvement of American education. People are not seeking that role with the same vigor that they did only a few years ago. We must continue to find out why, and then address these issues if we are to encourage strong and vital leadership for school systems in the future.

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APPENDIX I

SUPERINTENDENTS JOB CHARACTERISTICS SURVEY

DIRECTIONS: For each of the items listed below, please indicate the extent to which it would serve as a reason for you to decide NOT to be interested in becoming a superintendent of schools at some point in your professional career as an administrator. In rating each item, please refer to the following scale:

5 = Very important
4 = Somewhat important
3 = Important
2 = Somewhat irrelevant
1 = Irrelevant

1.	Lack of contact with students and teachers on a regular basis.	5	4	3	2	1
2.	Need to work with the school board.	5	4	3	2	1
3.	Involvement with community groups.	5	4	3	2	1
4.	Evening meetings and other commitments.	5	4	3	2	1
5.	Collective negotiations and labor relations.	5	4	3	2	1
6.	Amount of time involved with financial management.	5	4	3	2	1
7.	Need to engage in political activities and work with community pressure groups.	5	4	3	2	1
8.	Lack of tenure and job security.	5	4	3	2	1
9.	Financial rewards.	5	4	3	2	1
10.	Impact on family life.	5	4	3	2	1
11.	Involvement with long-term planning and policy formulation.	5	4	3	2	1
12.	Dealing with teacher activism and unions.	5	4	3	2	1
13.	High profile in the community.	5	4	3	2	1
14.	Mediating among multiple conflicting value orientations.	5	4	3	2	1
15.	Lack of personal time.	5	4	3	2	1

DIRECTIONS: Please rate the extent to which each of the following factors would influence you in making a decision to become a superintendent at some time in your career as an educational administrator. Refer to the following scale:

5 = Very important
4 = Somewhat important
3 = Important
2 = Somewhat irrelevant
1 = Very irrelevant

16.	Salary and fringe benefits.	5 4 3 2 1
17.	Ability to impact the activities of a total school district.	5 4 3 2 1
18.	Opportunity to work with community groups.	
19.	Prestige.	5 4 3 2 1
20.	Having a visible and central role in a community.	5 4 3 2 1
21.	Ability to be directly involved in important policy formulation.	5 4 3 2 1
22.	Negotiations and bargaining.	5 4 3 2 1
23.	Ability to exercise power and control over organizations.	5 4 3 2 1
24.	Opportunity to provide security and community recognition for family.	5 4 3 2 1
25.	Excitement of political dealing with various community and other groups.	5 4 3 2 1
26.	Ability to work effectively with adults rather than children as primary clients.	5 4 3 2 1
27.	Lack of boredom; constant challenges and a busy schedule.	5 4 3 2 1
28.	Direct contact with the board of education.	5 4 3 2 1
29.	Serving as a chief executive officer.	5 4 3 2 1
30.	Ability to have long-term impact in student learning.	5 4 3 2 1

TABLE I

Mean scores and rankings for each item descriptive of respondents' views of reasons for not pursuing the superintendency:

Item	Mean Rating	Ranking
1	3.22	8
2	3.04	9
3	4.33	2
4	4.25	3
5	2.66	11
6	2.22	13
7	4.52	1
8	2.22	13
9	1.78	15
10	3.66	5
11	2.55	12
12	2.78	10
13	3.33	7
14	4.04	4
15	3.66	5

N = 146

Mean scores and rankings for each item descriptive of respondents' views of reasons for seeking the superintendency as a career goal:

Item	Mean Rating	Ranking
16	3.33	7
17	3.66	6
18	2.66	9
19	1.78	13
20	2.07	12
21	4.07	4
22	1.78	13
23	4.78	1
24	3.33	7
25	4.07	4
26	2.22	11
27	4.22	3
28	1.78	13
29	2.33	10
30	4.55	2

N = 51